

## **Robert Curvin Interview: Marion Bolden**

CURVIN: So we have former superintendent of the Newark school district, Marion Bolden, and Marion would you first state that you are doing this voluntarily?

BOLDEN: I am doing this interview on a volunteer basis.

CURVIN: For educational purposes.

BOLDEN: For educational purposes.

CURVIN: Great thanks Marion, would you just talk a little bit about your roots in Newark?

BOLDEN: Okay. I was born and raised in Newark. I was born in 1946, I went to Newark public schools: Bergen Street School, Clinton Place Junior High School, South Side High School, which is now Malcolm X Shabazz. So that's my path in Newark and then I went to Montclair State University to get my Master's and I got a DHL from Bank Street College

CURVIN: what is a DH-

BOLDEN: It's a Doctorate of Humane Letters, for service to my community and the educational system.

CURVIN: And tell me a little bit about growing up in Newark and what it was like in your day?

BOLDEN: When I grew up in Newark, in terms of how the schools served the youngsters, I think in elementary school I got a very good background, in junior high school we had an integrated community, it was mostly African American and Jewish, but what I noticed then in this junior high school, the graduates went two different places. Most of the African American youngsters went to Southside High School and most of the Jewish youngsters went to Weequahic High School. And then I began to-

CURVIN: Is that because of where you lived?

BOLDEN: It's because of the demographics and where you live. So you go to the high school closest to your locale, and only then did I realize that people were saying 'it's too bad Marion that you have to go to South Side' because, in their opinion, Weequahic was a better school to attend and you know I was somewhat bothered by that comment but I began to realize the differences because I maintained friendship with a lot of my Clinton Place colleagues and we talked about our experiences in the summer and I still felt like I got a good education at Southside.

CURVIN: And then after Southside you then went to—

BOLDEN: I went to Montclair State. What I did experience, because I was a Mathematics Major, is that I didn't have as solid a background as some of the other youngsters that had come from some of the suburban schools. So I had to work harder to catch up, I never took calculus, they had taken calculus. They didn't even offer calculus at Southside High School, but they did offer it at Weequahic High School. So I said, you know as you grow older and you understand the dynamics of education, you realize that there were somethings that you were not exposed to.

CURVIN: Mhmm right, but overall you still thought that Southside was a solid school?

BOLDEN: At that time, yes it was.

CURVIN: What year did you complete Southside?

BOLDEN: I graduated from high school in 1964.

CURVIN: And then you went to work where?

BOLDEN: I graduated 1964, I came back to Newark because that's the only place I wanted to teach and, in fact, I went in to get an application and I wasn't even dressed appropriately. All I wanted was an application, and it was a little bit- it was a time of turmoil 1964, as you well know, and they were trying to integrate the schools with more African American teachers so they hired me on the spot so I thought that was interesting that I didn't even have to come back and do a real serious interview.

CURVIN: Where were you assigned?

BOLDEN: Well I was assigned to Barringer and at first I was very upset about it. I wanted to go back to Southside High School, but you know when I considered, children are children are children and they were African American children, Italian children, and I had to say to myself: you're going to teach youngsters and that's really what was important.

CURVIN: And you had a good experience at Barringer?

BOLDEN: My 14 years teaching at Barringer were perhaps the most gratifying of the years that I served the Newark Public Schools. Certainly I feel that I contributed significantly as Superintendent, but in terms of at the end of the day, how you felt, it's being with kids and knowing that kids have advanced and have learned and become confident because most of them didn't think that they were- their aptitude in mathematics was as strong as it was, you have to show them that you can do anything that anybody else can do.

CURVIN: Now in that period, there was a lot of talk, even then before 1967, before 1970, before the election of Gibson, that the schools were very highly politicized; did you get any sense of that?

BODLEN: I didn't get as much of that when I was teaching because my domain was the kids. I did not think about the politics. So you really only think about the politics when something dramatic happens or as you become an administrator and you realize that there's politics in everything. When I was teaching I did not feel the impact of the politics, when I was Superintendent that's all I dealt with. So there's a big difference between the positions that you hold and the reality of your world when it comes to politics in Newark.

CURVIN: When you say it's all that you dealt with when you moved up to an administrator position, what does that mean?

BOLDEN: Alright let me not say it's all that I dealt with, but I became much more aware of the politics.

CURVIN: And day by day you have to deal with who is looking for this and who is looking for that.

BOLDEN: Well let me just start by saying interviewing for the position of Superintendent and initially I did not want to be the Superintendent. I thought that I did a very good job as a support person and it was only when I had a number of community people come to me and say 'why not you', and I did consider it. It was a number of ministers and other community people who convinced me that why not attempt to help our kids in a different capacity, and they said they would always be there to support me.

But I knew that I was not the candidate, this was politics again, I know that they wanted an outside person to lead the school districts in Newark. They didn't want a local, but they had to have a local in the pool to appease the community, so I was that person. So in the interview process, the first person was offered the position, they declined, the second person was offered the position, they declined and I was third and they had to make me third so that at least the community felt like I was considered. So then I'm sitting there and then they panic 'what do we do' and they offered me a one-year contract, very few people know that, that's very insulting. They offered me a one-year contract—

CURVIN: When you say 'they' you're talking about the State?

BOLDEN: The Commissioner of the State. That was **Whitman** and **David Hesby**. I think Hesby had confidence because he was the one that said I think she's going to be fine and he said why not take the year contract all you have to do is show them that you can do it and so I did, and then I got the three-year contract and subsequent to that I was there nine years.

CURVIN: So when you were elevated to the top position to run the district and it was a State appointment, because by then of course the state had taken over the schools in '95 so this was five years later or what year did you start, 90?

BOLDEN: I started as Superintendent in 1999.

CURVIN: In '99 I see—

BOLDEN: I started teaching in the district in 68.

CURVIN: So it was four years after—when was the takeover?

BOLDEN: The takeover started in 1995 under Dr. Hall. Hall was the first State appointed Superintendent.

CURVIN: And you were her deputy?

BOLDEN: I was assistant Superintendent; I was not the deputy.

CURVIN: I see—

BOLDEN: Dr. Hall stayed with the district 4 years. There was the issue of that deficit and because it was someone from outside the district that created the deficit, is why they had to have some internal candidate apply for Superintendent and that's how that evolved.

CURVIN: So you're the State appointee, you come in four years after the takeover. How did you assess the situation? How did you identify the major challenges, the assets that you had to work with, the support you had to work with?

BOLDEN: You know when I became the Superintendent in 1999 I would have to characterize it as the best of times and the worst of times. We were then, an Abbot school district, we had become an Abbot school district and under the Abbot ruling, we had additional resources so in that regard it was a good time to be a Superintendent. You know resources were available to us that you know otherwise we would not even dream about. You know to have a social worker in a school, to have a tutor for a first grader who needs it, to have the kind of security in the school that you want, so we had an opportunity, I think if Abbot had been maintained, to do some really good things in terms of reform and having the school district move ahead. And even with that we still did quite a good job in elementary, high school is different. Why I say it was the best of times and it was the worst of times was because Abbot created a divide in the State because 31 districts seemed to be getting the lion's share of the money and there was so much hostility in the other districts and there began the fighting between the Abbots and non-Abbots.

CURVIN: How did that fighting play out?

BOLDEN: It played out in lots of ways. Internally, because we were a school district that was also afforded money under SDA, that's to build schools. Politicians in the city wanted to be involved in what goes on in terms of construction that was very obvious.

CURVIN: involved in what way, they wanted to give contracts or pick contractors?

BOLDEN: It was never as obvious as that. I had a visit from, at that time, Mayor Sharpe James and he started to ask me about school sites and what I kind of assured him was that I would never do anything that worked against his economic development and that one of the schools that was going to be built was West Kinney Junior High School which is now Newark Vocational and he says well I don't want it where it's currently built and I said it is a school where kids come from all over the city, it doesn't matter to us where it's located. So what I tried to suggest was that there are win-win scenarios. What I was not going to do was make any decisions that weren't in the best interest of kids and I said that very clearly and I think because the way in which my governance style, I did become a target of some folks in the district that were accustomed to coming to the district to get jobs, I'll just say it the way it is.

CURVIN: Did you have a lot of pressure to hire this person or hire that person?

BOLDEN: I think they tried to get those jobs by applying and going to people under me.

CURVIN: I see.

BOLDEN: What I had to tell folks was that you have to hire someone based on their qualifications and certainly certain jobs like the custodial staff and the teacher aides, it is my expectation that they should be from the community, but they should be also good and they should do their jobs.

CURVIN: Able to do their jobs.

BOLDEN: Right. I think that there had been concerns and maybe that's why the State came, in that, positions like principal jobs, there could be some negotiating in order to get that and that's not what we did.

CURVIN: Well there were widespread rumors, in fact, I did an interview with at least seven or 8 people who have all alleged that jobs were being given out for years on the basis of pay offs. In fact, at one time one of the board members was convicted for extorting money from employees to supposedly help promote them into jobs. Did you hear any of this?

BOLDEN: I heard that, but I have to be honest with you, I did not experience that. In fact that's not what I focused on because I had a job and my job was to make sure that the best principal was hired. There were rumors even when I was a teacher, there were rumors when I was an administrator that some people got their jobs because they're paying but I don't know that that's true because I personally, first hand, never saw it.

CURVIN: You said at one point earlier that you saw poor teachers become poor administrators and then become poor principals.

BOLDEN: Yes, I still question the wisdom of certain appointments. So my question to myself was how could these people get a job, is it nepotism? So certainly I question why people got jobs

but also what I found when I was Superintendent, there are people who feel that someone is capable when they're not because their way of gauging someone's confidence from those of us who are the educators in the system. I've had parents swear to me that you have to hire this person as our principal because we think this person will be great. Well that person might have nice personal appeal to you but I know that they're not a good manager and so there's always a kind of conflict between whether or not a person is going to be capable of doing a job.

So there was a lot of that and there was the issue of when, I guess, McGreevy was the governor and there were issues that I was not including the advisory board in decision making to the extent that I should. I didn't even realize it was an issue and they wanted to remove me. I mean there was that time; I guess it was 2003 where there was a lot of internal friction because the community felt that the Mayor and the Governor were removing me for political reasons and to some extent that's true. They said I didn't play ball and I said no, I play school and maybe that was not the right answer but that's how I felt. But you know as it turned out it was an opportunity for me to experience how the community will rise up and become involved in what's going on.

CURVIN: And, to make the story complete so that our viewers can understand, what happened?

BOLDEN: What happened is that there was a school board election and the commissioner said after the school board election we will decide the fate of the superintendent and the candidates that ran the, or who were in support of my tenure— all three of them won so therefore when the vote was taken it was 7-2 to keep my position, or keep my tenure.

CURVIN: And it would've been very difficult politically for the commissioner to remove you with that almost unanimous support for the advisory board.

BOLDEN: And I felt good because the community felt that what they were doing was in the best interest of their children and too many community people that I saw and really it wasn't about me, it was about the politics. They didn't want politics getting into schools and taking away an opportunity that a child might have if somebody is going to advocate on their behalf and they saw me as an advocate. They saw me as a Newark person. I mean I was State appointed but I went to court to fight for money against the State so as much as my title has to include State Superintendent, I was the community person. I am of Newark, I am for Newark, and I would fight very strongly if I felt that the kids were being shortchanged so to that extent I was the State but I was the superintendent of the children of Newark.

CURVIN: So if we now look back over, you were in the position for almost ten years?

BOLDEN: Yea, 9 years.

CURVIN: 9 years, so I when I look back and say, this is what Superintendent Bolden accomplished, what's at the top of the list?

BOLDEN: I have to say that the incremental growth in terms of student achievement in K-8 was significant. I would also have to say that the graduation rate—

[Pause- Bolden takes a phone call and returns]

CURVIN: We're going back to your accomplishments; we're talking about the achievement ...

BOLDEN: I guess I would be most satisfied with the performance of the K-8 in terms of student achievement and at one time our fourth grade reading scores were higher than the charter schools because the North Star administrator said, how did that happen, and so you know we had focused very much on early literacy. But what people don't know and maybe I didn't do a good job publicizing it was that 7<sup>th</sup> grade math scores were like 72% and it started at 21%. So I think I was criticized by the Booker administration because he said my growth was incremental and I said that's the only way you can do it. There's no Hawthorne effect, if scores jump 25 points in one year you would question how that happened and whether or not you're going to be able to sustain it. So in the elementary, we had done very well and I think it had been noted all over the place but it doesn't serve a mayor if you want to take over the schools to say that things are better. The other thing is the graduation rate which it went from 49% to 70% and that's comparing apples to apples. In other words using the same criteria freshman cohort to senior cohort that's the way that the graduation rate increased criticism with that was that many of the youngsters had to take an alternative assessment to get validated but even with that criteria, it started with almost 60% of the kids having to take the alternative to switching, so 60% of the kids were passing the test and 40% who graduated were taking the alternative assessment which is still a fair indicator that they did everything that the State asked them to do to graduate and what people need to understand, if it started out at 40%-49% these kids were leaving us and although they were still struggling they were staying in the schools and so you have that opportunity to educate them, you can't educate them if they're on the streets and Abbott resources is another indicator that it made a difference because we had social workers, we were able to have truant officers, we were able to keep our kids in school and I also went to the city, the city gave me 64 million dollars to deal with what the State would not deal with. The boys were embarrassed because they didn't have uniforms, because they didn't have a stadium because they didn't have things that these suburban districts have. You know we demanded cleanliness, we demanded that there's no graffiti and in other words, create a climate that's clean, nurturing, respectful of the kids and it made all the difference in the world so what people don't understand too is kids live in a city that had a lot of violence and the schools became the safe haven, the kids told me this. It's when they're in school they felt safe, it's when they left school that they didn't feel safe so in terms of accomplishments that's something that I'm very proud of too. We had a truce with the gangs and it was not brokered by me it was Ras Baraka and other social activist out there and we brought all the gangs together and we talked about what they needed, having a truce inside the schools, and I had it on my wall, a proclamation and all of the gangs had signed it and they said during school we're not going to do anything to create issues of violence.

CURVIN: What did they want for that?

BOLDEN: There were a couple requests. They asked the city to help them in terms of jobs and things of that nature, what they asked me to do was to put in place a GED program and I did and I thought, you know, just for them to ask for that I said wow they asked me for something easy for me to do but I was just proud that that's what they wanted, they wanted to go back and get their high school diplomas [28:34]